

Rangers with Class

By Skip Williams



Most players think of the ranger as an outdoorsy character who is more at home in the wilderness than in the dungeon or the city. If you want to create a rugged and self-sufficient individualist, a ranger is a fine choice. But the character can also excel in a variety of other roles, from swashbuckling ne'er-do-well to tenacious do-gooder.

The Pros and Cons of a Ranger

The ranger's wide range of abilities allows him to survive and even excel in almost any surroundings.

Ranger Assets

The ranger class provides an effective combination of fighting ability and an array of useful talents, including a few divine spells as the character advances in level. Below are several assets you have going for you when you play a ranger.

- **Favored Enemies:** A ranger can choose a certain kind of creature whose nature and habits he knows inside and out as a favored enemy. Thereafter, he gains numerous bonuses when fighting or interacting with such creatures. As he attains higher levels, he can choose additional favored enemies and also get bigger bonuses against any some of those he already has.
- **Good Attack Bonus:** A ranger's base attack bonus is +1 per level, which is the best in the game. Thus, rangers can usually expect to hit what they attack.
- **Good Fortitude and Reflex Saves:** A ranger uses the best save progression in the game for Fortitude and Reflex saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). This natural resilience and grace helps him resist most effects that attack his body, such as poison, polymorphing, and energy drain. He can also avoid most effects that would entrap or deal damage to him, such as area spells, entanglement, and many traps.
- **Good Weapon Selection:** Because a ranger can use any simple or martial weapon, he's a deadly opponent no matter what weapon he has in hand.
- **Good Skill Points:** At six skill points per level, the ranger can gain ranks in a respectable number of skills -- in fact, only the rogue gets more skill points per level than the ranger. And if your ranger has a decent Intelligence score, he gains even more skill points.
- **Broad Skill Selection:** The ranger has a substantial list of class skills. Most of these involve physical activities (for example, Climb, Jump, and Swim), but he also has access to stealth skills (such as Hide and Move Silently), perception skills (such as Listen and Spot), and practical skills (such as Craft, Use Rope, and Handle Animal).
- **Combat Style:** At 2nd level, each ranger chooses a combat style that grants him bonus combat feats. The archery style grants the Rapid Shot feat and later the Manyshot feat. The two-weapon combat style grants the Two-Weapon Fighting feat and later the Improved Two-Weapon Fighting feat.

- **Other Bonus Feats:** A ranger also gains Track (which allows him to track creatures) and Endurance (which improves his stamina) as bonus feats.
- **Animal Companion:** At 4th level, a ranger gains an animal ally that trusts him implicitly and generally obeys his orders. As he advances in level, the animal becomes even more powerful.
- **Nature-Related Abilities:** Even a beginning ranger can influence animals and get along in the wild. As he progresses in level, he gains additional abilities that improve his movement through natural terrain. Eventually, he can literally vanish from sight in natural surroundings.

Ranger Weaknesses

The ranger's many advantages come at a price. Here are a few of the disadvantages you should keep in mind if you're considering a ranger character.

- **Poor Will Saving Throws:** Rangers have the worst progression for Will saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). Thus, they aren't so great at avoiding most kinds of magical attacks.
- **Mediocre Armor Class:** The ranger is proficient with only light armor and shields (except tower shields). If he wears heavier armor, his combat-oriented bonus feats cease functioning. Despite these limitations, the typical ranger enjoys a decent personal defense, even though his Armor Class isn't the best. This shortcoming may leave him more vulnerable to damage in battle than other characters who do a great deal of fighting.
- **Mediocre Hit Points:** The ranger's 8-sided Hit Dice give him a fairly impressive hit point total. Unlike the cleric and the druid, however, he seldom has hit points to spare -- especially given his lackluster Armor Class and combat orientation.

Playing a Classy Ranger

Great rangers usually use the following techniques. So if you're playing a one of these characters, try to build your strategy around these concepts.

Stay Alert

Your perception skills and your affinity for nature can protect you and your party from nasty surprises, so look for the best opportunities to use them. Your tracking capability works best if you can study a site before your allies cover it with their own footprints, so it often pays to march in the front rank, so that you can dart ahead to look for tracks. Your stealth skills (if you have them) are useful for reconnoitering areas before your whole group enters them, and a quick look ahead can help your party decide on a course of action when the options aren't terribly clear.

Fight Smart

Despite your lack of stout armor and your mediocre hit points, you're a fighting character, so be ready for combat at all times. The combat style you choose at 2nd level presents both opportunities and difficulties for you. The archery style allows you to attack at a distance -- perhaps even from cover or some other place of relative safety. But even if you choose archery, you can't always count on staying out of melee. Sometimes foes will pop up right

in your face, and sometimes your more vulnerable allies will need protection.

The two-weapon fighting style, on the other hand, can make you a veritable melee machine, especially when you're facing your favored enemies. The extra attacks you gain from two-weapon fighting reduce your attack bonuses, however, so don't wade into battle with two weapons unless you're sure you can make all your attacks count. When you face well-armored foes, you can always use just a single weapon to maximize your attack bonuses. Furthermore, you should be prepared to make ranged attacks when necessary, since you won't always be able to reach your foes for melee attacks.

Friends in Need

If you're the only fighting character in your party, you need to stand in the front line, even though doing so might not fit your combat style and could prove unhealthy for you in the long run. Even if you have a fighting ally, you must still keep the needs of all your comrades in mind.

The Party's Stealth Person: If your group has a rogue, ranger, bard, or monk, or spellcaster whose spells provide concealment and mobility, that character can serve as a scout for the rest of the party. Be ready to accompany her on scouting trips, because your presence can ensure her safety. You and the scout might move ahead together, or you might want to hang back with your bow to provide some firepower if she gets into trouble. Even when you stay behind, be ready to go to the scout's rescue when she finds trouble, as characters who take point often do. Your light armor gives you decent speed, and your perception skills might allow you to avoid whatever fate befell her. Your timely intervention in such a case can save the scout's skin. In addition, a rogue or other character with the sneak attack ability needs combat support in the form of an ally who can help her flank enemies. So get used to fighting in partnership with such characters and make sure you incorporate the advantage it provides into your tactics.

The Party's Arcane Spellcaster: Wizards, sorcerers, and bards can pack a real punch with their spells, and they often serve as the party's heavy artillery. But since such characters usually have poor Armor Classes and very few hit points, they must rely on you to keep the opposition at a distance. You might not have a great Armor Class and inexhaustible hit points, but you can probably do better in combat than most arcane spellcasters can.

The Party's Divine Spellcaster: Get friendly and stay friendly with your party's cleric, druid, or paladin. This character's healing spells can keep you on your feet longer while you're hacking your way through foes.

Some Key Equipment

A ranger relies heavily on his gear, so it pays to collect the right equipment. Below are some essential pieces to pack.

- **Armor:** Buy the best light armor you can afford. At the beginning of your career, you probably can't afford more than studded leather, but move up to a chain shirt or mithral armor as soon as you can. A shield is problematical, since rangers tend to use both hands in a fight. Those who choose the archery style use bows, which require two hands, and those who choose two-weapon fighting need their hands free to hold both of their weapons. Nevertheless, a shield can be a good investment. You can carry a heavy shield and just drop it when you're ready to fight, but a buckler may be a better bet. You can hold onto a buckler while shooting a bow, and even when fighting with two weapons, though you take an attack penalty for doing so. In either case, you don't get the buckler's Armor Class benefit while attacking, but you don't have to waste time dropping it, and you have it ready to use when you need it.

You need all the Armor Class you can get, so add other defensive items, such as *rings of protection* and *amulets of natural armor*, whenever you can afford them. Keep in mind that several lesser items whose bonuses stack give you better protection at a cheaper price than one big item does.

- **Primary Melee Weapon:** If you've chosen archery as your combat style, you still need a martial or exotic weapon with a good damage rating and the ability to deal critical hits. A longsword is a good choice, but a short sword or a rapier also works well, especially if you choose the Weapon Finesse feat.

If you've chosen the two-weapon fighting style, your choice of melee weapon is critical. A double weapon offers good damage potential plus the ability to use one end as a two-handed weapon when you're limited to a single attack. It also works well with the Weapon Focus feat because you get the feat's attack bonus with each end. Most double weapons are exotic, however, so you need the Exotic Weapon proficiency feat to use them effectively. A quarterstaff is a simple double weapon that's less effective than its exotic counterparts, but using it effectively doesn't require a feat.

On the other hand, a double weapon isn't the only way to go for a two-weapon fighter. You need to have a light weapon in your off hand to keep your two-weapon attack penalty to a minimum. You can use two light weapons (which works just as well as a double weapon for the purpose of the Weapon Focus feat) or a one-handed weapon in your primary hand and a light weapon in your off hand.

- **Backup Melee Weapon:** Always have a light weapon or two handy. A light slashing weapon, such as a dagger or hand axe, can help get you out of a tight spot (for example, being swallowed whole by a big monster). It also pays to have a hefty weapon on hand in case you lose your primary one or find that it isn't effective. Make sure this weapon deals a different kind of damage than your primary weapon does. For example, if you normally use a longsword (a slashing weapon) consider a morningstar (which deals both bludgeoning and piercing damage) as a backup.
- **Ranged Weapon:** Even if your combat style is two-weapon fighting, you need to choose a martial ranged weapon. A longbow has good range and deals good damage, but if you have a decent Strength score (and you probably do), get a composite longbow that lets you add your full Strength bonus to damage rolls. If your combat style is archery, get the best bow you can afford -- probably a masterwork longbow when you begin play and a magic composite longbow later on. A few magic arrows won't hurt either. But since the enhancement bonus from a magic ranged weapon doesn't stack with the one from magic ammunition, stick to arrows with useful special properties. Flaming or frost arrows deal extra damage, and keen arrows can prove very effective against your favored enemies -- provided you've chosen enemies that are subject to critical hits.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies, and he served as the sage of *Dragon Magazine* for eighteen years. Skip is a codesigner of the **D&D** 3rd edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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